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ABSTRACT

This paper describes one strand of the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) project aimed at developing a set of international education indicators. This strand is concerned with attitudes and expectations of elementary and secondary schools held by parents, teachers, the public, employers, and students. The network of countries (Network D) involved have wrestled with a variety of conceptual and technical problems and have looked at the current state of the art in seven OECD countries. The similarity of thinking and of policy priority in these countries (Belgium, France, the Netherlands, Italy, Switzerland, the United States, and the United Kingdom) has been a dominant theme. Described is an analysis of the stages that the network has encountered. The first was a period of orientation and concerned itself primarily with the body of evidence that exists on the experience of school and school effectiveness. The second took a pragmatic approach by looking at the kinds of polls and surveys of attitudes and expectations that have been conducted. The third stage, in progress, includes seven additional countries--Spain, Finland, Denmark, Sweden, Portugal, Turkey, and the Walloon portion of Belgium. This stage has already produced international research studies of priority issues in the educational field. An important consideration must be that the target audience will be involved in the refinement and development of indicators. (RR)

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INDICATORS OF ATTITUDES TO EDUCATION - WHAT DO YOU EXPECT?

John E.C. MacBeath

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This paper describes one strand of the OECD project aimed at developing a set of international education indicators. This strand is concerned with attitudes and expectations of elementary and secondary schools, held by parents, teachers, public, employers and students. The network of countries involved in this development have wrestled with a range of conceptual and technical problems, and have looked at the current state of the art in seven OECD countries. The similarity of thinking and of policy priority in the various countries has been a dominant theme. Now engaged in the production of some leading indicators, the question is will it prove a useful exercise, and will it help to educate about education?

Background and purpose of the project

Network D is one of four OECD networks engaged in the development of a set of international indicators. Together these four networks hope to produce a range of indicators which will have international validity, and be useful to OECD countries in evaluating the health of their educational systems.

The indicator set which will emerge from Network D focuses on attitudes and expectations. Its contribution to the overall indicator set will be a limited number of key indicators of how the system is seen to be performing from the point of view of the general public, parents, teachers, employers, and student themselves.

Network D is entering the third phase of its work which should, by 1996 have produced an indicator set which meets three essential criteria:

- it is conceptually well grounded and technically valid
- it is agreed by all participating countries
- it is able to be used in an international context

The indicator set is, of course, impossible to realise without there being viable methods of data collection and analysis in every country using the indicators. The Network will have to identify ways in which that task can be achieved economically and with sound comparative methodology.

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Where do you start?

To any sober minded person this is an awesome goal and beset by pitfalls. These come in various guises and sizes. There are technical matters of data-collection, measurement, and sampling, There are questions of culture, language, and ethnicity, the nature of centralised and decentralised systems. There are political and policy-related issues, and there are underlying it all philosophical and conceptual arguments about perceptions and attitude, meaning and interpretation.

The French commentator, Robert Ballion argues that the pursuit of this goal is worthwhile:

> "....teaching and learning come about as a consequence of how the actors play their parts. What the actors do has two sources - one is largely determined by the structure which contains them, the other derives from attitudes and predispositions which they bring with them. These attitudes and predispositions are more or less amenable to change, but they are deeply rooted, and they shape the response of the individuals to the educational structure within which they find themselves.
>
> In any attempt to analyse the educational process there are two good reasons to get to grips with people's attitudes. First of all because they are in intervening variable which determines educational outcomes. Secondly, they not only affect, but explain, the context and the givens in which that educational process is taking place.

After a number of decades of research into attitudes and expectations of the "actors" in the education system the significance of these is no longer open to debate. What is much more debatable is the process of quantifying these and then taking the further step of turning them into indicators which would tell us something meaningful about any educational system, let alone in comparison with others. The problem is succinctly stated by the Dutch first chairman of the network, Sjaak Sanderbergen:

> "In the field of activities it is difficult to obtain reliable information. Responses are easily influenced by tendencies such as eagerness to please, factors such as selective memory, lack of self knowledge, the impact of recent experiences and other methodological effects. Even more important perhaps is the different values participating countries in the OECD attach to information in this area. Finally, according to many 'hard boiled' decision-makers attitudes and expectations form a loosely defined and foggy domain."

Given these difficulties, it would be easy to give up the idea entirely and concentrate on safer and more reliable statistical evidence. However, participants in network D felt that it was important to try and meet this challenge and to see to what extent these difficulties could be overcome.

The seven countries composing Network D (Belgium, France, The Netherlands, Italy, Switzerland, the United States, the United Kingdom) set out without any illusions that these issues could be sweetly resolved, but believing that they could be dealt with. Rather than seeking a counsel of perfection it was agreed that we should travel hopefully. After all, even in the domain of 'hard' education indicators there is still ambiguity and dispute, and widely-used economic indicators are still in a developmental state despite a twenty year history.

The first stage of the Network (1988-1990) was a period of orientation, of trying to establish working relationships among the seven countries, dealing with the subtleties and nuances of language, of different educational traditions and assumptions, and establishing a common terminology and conceptual reference points. It concerned itself primarily with the body of evidence that exists on the experience of school and school effectiveness. Starting from that theoretical base what kinds of indicators would be derived?

Looking to the literature

Since the 1960s there has been a great deal of work, much of it sociological, on the way in which students experience school. There are a number of consistent themes within that research:

- Students generally have a fairly clear conception of what school is for, but.....
- The way in which students perceive the purpose of school is derived from their experience and is not always consistent with what administrators, teachers or parents perceive as its purposes
- Students have a fairly clear conception of who are the "winners" and who are the "losers", and what is required for success
- Students have a fairly clear grasp of the unwritten norms and expectations of the school culture.
- Students' response to school is considerably affected by their cultural experience, the expectations of their parents, and attitudes to education which they bring with them.
- Attitudes to learning and to future careers are also considerably shaped by the expectations of teachers, and by the attitudes of other students
- School achievement is directly related to the way in which attitudes and expectations change and develop in the process of schooling

These themes have been explored independently and in parallel by researchers in Europe and the United States using a range of different methodologies. Much of that research relies on observation, inference and interpretation of what the researchers themselves saw. Ultimately, however, it rests on how students themselves recount their own experience, whether in the context of interview, questionnaire, or through their own descriptive and creative writing.

In addition to two or three decades of work on students' responses to school, there has also been research directed to the role of parents. Most of the sociological research emphasises the strength of relationship between parental expectations and school success, and the critical influence of socio-cultural milieu and home background. Parents are, of course, yesterday's students, and studies have repeatedly demonstrated that parents' own experience of school provides the foundation for their attitudes to their children, to their children's learning, and to their children's schooling. One consistent finding is that parents generally want for their children more than they got themselves.

Research into teachers' attitudes and expectations has also been rich and extensive. Perhaps the milestone research in this area (or at least the most well known) was Rosenthal and Jacobson's study of the relationship between teachers' expectations and students' success. It was both preceded, and succeeded, by numerous studies which documented in one way or another the significant role played by teachers' attitudes to their students and by their broader educational values.

A different approach to the same set of questions is exemplified by school effectiveness research which starts not with the experience of students, parents, or teachers, but with school itself as an organisation. The primary research question is "what makes an effective school?" and in the process has attempted to identify key factors such as "school leadership", "parental involvement", "school climate", "discipline", "teacher effectiveness" or "student-teacher relationships". This led straight back into attitudes and expectations, because school climate is less determined by the physical context than by how people behave and relate to one another; teacher effectiveness rests to a significant degree on the expectations, confidence and morale of the teacher; and student-teacher relationships are a product of how teachers and students actually perceive and respond to one another.

This examination of the literature and evidence took the Network some way down the road to developing relevant attitudinal indicators. It suggested, for example, that at the very simplest level, it is useful to ask students whether they find school a satisfying place to be. From that starting point it is possible to build a more sophisticated set of questions which throw light on those apparently significant aspects of school life such as teacher effectiveness, teacher-student relationships and school climate.

Phase 2 - Towards attitudinal Indicators

With this as a background to its thinking Network D started the second phase of its life (1989-91). It was decided to take a more pragmatic approach to the issue by looking at the kinds of poll and surveys of attitudes and expectations that had been conducted in member countries. So, Network D member countries were asked to research, and document, all polls and surveys into attitudes and expectations that had been conducted within the time period 1985 - 1990, having as their target groups, students, teachers, parents, general public, and employers.

This data would then be analysed to discover:

- What kinds of attitudes are member countries interested in surveying?
- What is the purpose of seeking this information?
- Who is it that seeks to collect that information?
- To whom do they put their questions?
- What kind of questions do they actually ask?
- What is the size of sample?

Although it might have been fruitful to analyse what the results of all these surveys showed this was not the focus of the exercise. The purpose was more to discover whether or not there are key themes and key questions used in all member countries, whether these were in fact underpinned by some implicit notion of these as "indicators", and whether there existed vehicles that could be used for data-collection specifically for OECD purposes.

That proved to be a valuable exercise. It provided, in an international context, the answers to a number of questions.

What kind of information is collected?

In all countries involved in this exercise there was surprise at the amount of material that existed, often not in the public domain and sometimes requiring a fair amount of detective work. In the U.K., for example, it led to a publication entitled "Attitudes to School" which referenced over 100 pieces of research into teacher, parent, and student attitudes in the last five years. The second surprise was that, on analysis, some investigations, although enjoying the humble reputation of 'surveys' carried out by polling organisations, proved to be more stringent in their sampling and methodology than equivalent research conducted with a prestigious university cachet.

Why is information collected?

In all member countries there was research carried out into views of students, parents, teachers and the general public. Some of that was conducted primarily for academic purposes but a much larger body was commissioned for practical and policy-making purposes. Research which falls into this second category was normally driven by one of more of the following motives:

1. to provide feedback to policy-makers and administrators
2. to guide policy making.
3. to provide information for public consumption or to influence public opinion.
4. to provide information for pressure groups, political parties or professional bodies.

Information was sometimes gathered commercially because there was a market for such information. Reader's Digest is probably the best example of that kind of market. Sometimes information was gathered simply as a public service with no particular political intent or content, but more typically it was collected in order to influence opinion in one way or another. Surveys were sometimes used by governments to demonstrate public accolade for their policy, or to test the water before setting unpopular reforms in motion. These had sometimes to be set against parallel polls or surveys carried out by pressure groups designed to reach different conclusions.

Who collects information?

Polls and surveys into attitudes are most frequently carried out, or commissioned, by government itself - in France by the Ministry of Education, in the United States by the government-funded National Center for Educational Statistics. In Switzerland the Department of Military Service uses a captive clientele to conduct surveys into attitudes to school of 20 year olds.

Most countries collect such information at a national level but in some countries is at state or regional level, most typically in countries with more than one national language, for example, in Belgium (French and Dutch) and Switzerland (French, German and Italian). In the United Kingdom most research is specific to England and Wales, or to Scotland or to Northern Ireland, and there is very little 'British' national research.

Research may also be initiated independently of national or local government. University departments carry out their own or commissioned research. State-funded or voluntary bodies standing outside the educational system, for example, the Dutch Institute for Preventive Healthcare, also conduct educational research to provide public information or influence opinion. Newspapers and television frequently commission research from polling organisations such as Gallup or Harris as do political parties in opposition, professional organisations and teachers unions. In Italy, for example, the Teachers

Co-operative for Democratic Initiatives commissions a polling body CENSIS to provide documentation on teacher salary, working conditions, training and status.

Methodology and Sampling

There are essentially two main ways in which people's attitudes are surveyed, either by asking them to talk about it, or by asking them to write about it. The medium for talk is usually the interview, and the medium for writing usually the questionnaire. Both of these approaches may use closed, or open-ended questions, a combination of both, or they may use questions which lie somewhere on the spectrum between closed and open.

In some cases the respondent may be asked an open-ended question such as the following:

> What is the main reason for choosing this school for your child?
>
> (Source: Belgium. Prevention of Juvenile Delinquency in School).

This question may produce a one word answer, or a highly developed reply. The advantage of such a question is that it can yield a great deal of qualitative information, but it is time consuming both in administration and analysis and, therefore, requires smaller samples than the more closed type of question.

More typically respondents are given a list of alternatives to choose from, for example:

> What are according to you, the most important goals of education ?
>
> - to prepare young people for a profession
> - to develop intelligence
> - to develop creativity
> - to develop the character and aptitudes necessary to cope with the problems of life
> - to provide a broad cultural background
> - to ensure an education that enables young people to adapt themselves to necessary changes in their professional life
> - to teach young people to become good citizens
>
> France (Conditions of life and aspirations of the French)

The advantage of this closed rating scale kind of question is that it is easier for the respondent to give a quick reply, and analysis is very simple and straightforward. This kind of question lends itself to self-completion questionnaires and can be used with very large samples. Polling organisations use questions such as this in an interview context. This increases the number of questions they can ask in a relatively short space of time, and the interview context allows some prompts and follow-up questions. Interviews also have an advantage over self-completion questionnaires because they do not rely on the literacy of the respondent or on his/her motivation to complete the form and return it.

The supervised self-completion questionnaire, is widely used with school students, who provide a large captive clientele. The National Educational Longitudinal Study in the United States, for example, uses a self- completion questionnaire with its sample of 24,600 students. Teachers might also be regarded as "captive" and both France and Italy succeed in getting a 100% return from teachers with national samples of 2,000 and 5,000 respectively.

Researchers often use a combination of methodologies. For example, sometimes both self-completion questionnaires and interviews are used as complementary sources of evidence, and may employ both closed and open questions. Sometimes self-completion questionnaires are sent out and then followed up by an interview, or interviews are conducted with a selected sample of those who completed the questionnaires. Other methodologies in use are group interviews. They are particularly useful with school students because they not only allow larger numbers of people to be seen, but because they ease inhibitions and help to spark off ideas. They are regarded, however, as less reliable because groups tend to establish a norm and, therefore, inhibit some of their members from saying what they really think.

Other methods in use are the personal log, or diary, which asks the respondent to record what they think or feel over a period of time. Personal observation is also used in which the researcher observes or participates as well as talking to people. Observation requires a great deal of interpretation and inference, however, and it is generally felt that indicators should derive as far as possible from "low inference" data where the questions that are put are as pure, reliable, and valid as possible.

Polling organisations typically use samples of around 1,000, arguing that a well constructed sample of that size is an adequate one, although many countries use samples of about 2,000, for example "Conditions of life and Aspirations of the French", "Reasons for choice of school and opinions about education" (The Netherlands), "Public attitudes towards the Public Schools" (US), "Parental Awareness of School Education" (UK).

The viability of the Network D project was strengthened by this survey of surveys because it showed that in all participating countries there were existing vehicles for data collection, and that these were some common approaches. It also demonstrated an almost uncanny preoccupation with the same themes, national surveys often asking almost identical questions and sometimes throwing up identical results. For example there tended to be very similar international findings on parental reasons for choice of school, satisfaction of with schools, rating of teachers as against other professions, teacher morale and satisfaction with teaching.

From this experience Network members found it easy to compile a list of common concerns ("préoccupations communes"). Seven key themes were identified:

- teaching as a profession
- the management of schools
- the curriculum
- communication
- student-teacher relationships
- equality
- educational policy

These suggest areas in which countries should seek to identify key indicators.

In the first cluster - teaching as a profession - there are a number of issues which would provide the basis for an indicator on teacher morale and satisfaction, and perceptions of the profession's status. This might be gauged

a) from the perspective of teachers themselves -

for example, borrowing a question from a 1985 survey by IPSOS in France "I would like to leave teaching to take up another job"

b) from the point of the general public.

In the United States the public are asked to rank teachers in terms of 'deserved' salary against seven other occupational groups - medical doctors, lawyers, engineers, pharmacists, nurses, plumbers, clergy.

c) from the point of view of students -

How attractive is teaching as a career option as compared to others? What are the factors that make young people want, or not want , to enter the profession?

an example from Switzerland

Which of the following aspects gives you most professional satisfaction?

- free time
- good salary
- job security
- having an educational challenge
- relationships with children
- opportunity of combining a job with family life
- low demands
- independent work

Switzerland (The professional life cycle of teachers)

This kind of information would be useful in comparative context, , particularly over a period of time, say every two years, allowing some analysis of countries apparently on their way up and those on their way down.

To talk of 'teachers' of course is to talk of a very heterogeneous group of people who comprise elementary and secondary, young and old, long-serving and probationers, sole wage earners and second wage earners, men and women. A finer grained analysis would undoubtedly provide important differentiations within teachers as a whole group, as might the following kind of probe:

This kind of information also requires to be accompanied by some contextual background of different countries and with some hard data, for example, on teachers' level of salary, working week and tax liability in the various countries, compared with other professions.

In the area of attitudes to school it should be possible to devise an indicator which gauges the degree of satisfaction with schools from viewpoints of students, teachers, parents, perhaps employers and general public as well.
The purposes and priorities of schools is a significant theme in an international context. What do parents in different countries see as the priorities of elementary and secondary schools? What are the leading criteria for the choice of school and how do various players in the system answer the question "what makes a good school?". Disaggregation by socio-economic group, ethnic group and gender, for example, is likely also to be illuminating.

There is useful data here both in terms of the similarities and differences across countries, as well as in terms of similarities and differences between the perceptions of one group and another. In France, for example, there is very wide disagreement between teachers and students as to the main goals of the secondary school. It would be useful to know whether that gap of understanding is narrowing or widening over time, and whether that it is replicated in an international context.

There are other highly significant areas identified within school effectiveness studies such as leadership and school climate. The first of these - school leadership - will undoubtedly reveal a variation in emphasis from country to the next depending on quite different traditions and and expectations of the role and function of the 'head teacher' (U.K.), Principal (U.S.), or Director (France).

Because of these differences rather than in spite of of them, this is a fruitful area of inquiry. We might, for instance, compare the three most important qualities selected by parents, pupils, or teachers for the tenure of that office. It would also be useful to have comparative data on school climate, and the role of leadership in creating it, (or at least the perceived role of leadership) in creating it. However difficult to quantify what is seen across countries as comprising a positive school climate is information not only of interest to academics but of real policy value as well.

Phase III

For the first meeting of phase III the, now 13, participating countries in the network (the original seven plus Spain, Finland, Denmark, Sweden, Portugal,Turkey and the other half of Belgium - the "Walloons") were asked to bring a researched study of 'hot' priority issues in the educational field, and some key indicators that might flow from that. Again there was surprise at how much agreement there was on policy priorities. The Spanish contribution could have been written by a Finn, and the French by a Swede.

All countries were engaged in a shift of decision-making towards the school level with attendant implications for the role of the school principal and the school governing bodies, generally combined with a counter-force towards centralisation of certain functions. Minimal national standards and comparability were a theme in decentralised administrations and for those that already had that the greater emphasis was on flexibility and choice at local level. In all countries the interests of parents were being given a higher profile, and greater account taken of the response of students as main players.

The immediate task of Network D, as it enters the third phase of its work, is to define four key indicators arising out of this demarcation of the common territory. The four indicators decided in Paris in early March will be attitudes and expectations with regard to

- centralisation and decentralisation and the consequent implications for the role of administrators, school heads, governing bodies, parents, teachers and students.

- the performance of schools and whether they meet the needs of disparate groups - employers, parents, students, the general public and teachers

- teachers and teaching - their status, salary, training and in-service development and their conditions of service, from the point of view of teachers themselves as well as the general public, and students.

- the curriculum, what it promises and what it delivers from the point of employers, higher education bodies, parents, and students.

By the time of the next meeting in Edinburgh in September it is hoped that significant progress will have been made by the four international working groups engaged in the exercise of constructing these four leading indicators.

A useful exercise?

Ultimately is it a useful exercise, or one so fraught and problematic that it is counter-productive? No matter how thorough the work and no matter the care taken to avoid simplistic comparisons and inferences, ambiguities and problems of interpretation will be bound to remain. But perhaps it depends in what we understand and believe to be the function of indicators. Do we lean to the barometer or to the tin opener school of thought? If one sees indicators as providing some valid objective measure then we are unlikely to attain that, at least to the satisfaction of everyone. If, on the other hand, we see the value of indicators more in terms of opening a can of worms then we can be successful in those terms. Ideally we would hope to steer a course between too buttoned down an approach and one which was so slippery it eluded anyone's grasp.

Who will; they be for?

The ultimate product should be for a number of audiences, and therein lies the conflict of function. They are for policy-makers but they shouldn't serve facile decision-making. They are for to wide public but they do not speak for themselves. In both contexts they require at least some interpretive comment. It is important that their value as **proxy measures** is grasped, that their imperfections are acknowledged, and that they serve to educate about priorities and values in education. This means that the underlying models and assumptions have also to be explained and discussed.

"The meaning of an indicator depends crucially upon the cultural context in which it is imbedded, the model of schooling to which it is linked, and the assumptions connected with it." (Guthrie, Binkley, Phillips 1991)

Some commentators (eg Bryk and Hermanson) argue that there is a need to look after the "stakeholder groups" who provide data, so they come to see it as their own and have an investment in its use. Numerous commentators make the point that the suppliers of the information - (teachers, parents, pupils, administrators) have by virtue of that activity some involvement and that the indicators which they supply ought to be accessible and fed back to them. They also have a part to play in the refinement and development of indicators.

In summary, the task of Network D is a formidable one, politically sensitive in a national context, potentially dynamite in in an international context. Aware of that we look to critical friends for counsel, comfort, and constructive critique.

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